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The shifting landscape of prime ministerial accountability to parliament:

An analysis of Liaison Committee scrutiny sessions

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Abstract

Prime ministerial power is always contingent, based on the utilisation of personal and institutional resources, subject to various formal and informal constraints. Parliament is both a political resource to be utilised, but also a veto-player. In the absence of formal mechanisms setting out the requirements for UK prime ministerial accountability to parliament, a fluid and essentially personalised relationship has developed. Regular prime ministerial appearances before the House of Commons Liaison Committee, begun in 2002, have added to parliament's scrutiny toolkit. This article considers the accountability of the prime minister to parliament by analysing the emergence and development of the Liaison Committee evidence sessions, and draws on interviews with participants and examination of the session transcripts, in order to assess the value of this scrutiny mechanism within the broader framework of prime ministerial-legislative relations.

Keywords

UK parliament, prime minister, executive scrutiny, Liaison Committee.

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Introduction

Standing at the apex of the ministerial ‘cone’ that characterizes UK central government (Mackintosh 1962, 452), the prime minister is an obviously powerful political actor, and one who prompts extensive debate both about how executive powers are utilised and how they are constrained. Hennessy (2000, 6) argued that this debate ‘lies at the heart of the British constitution’, involving as it does ‘the necessary restraint of the potentially overmighty powers’ that are wielded by prime ministers. H.H. Asquith commented in 1926 that ‘the office of the prime minister is what its holder chooses and is able to make of it’ (in Hennessy 2000, 3). Crucially, this insight applies not just to the powers of the prime minister, but also to the structures of parliamentary scrutiny and oversight to which the prime minister is subjected.

In 2002, then prime minister Tony Blair facilitated a significant realignment of parliamentary scrutiny infrastructure when he agreed to appear twice a year before the House of Commons Liaison Committee - the committee comprising the chairs of the select committees - to answer questions about government policy and decision making. Traditionally an organisation focused on administering the select committee system, the Liaison Committee had positioned itself as a pivotal scrutiny stakeholder in 2000 with a key report which sought to rebalance the relationship between parliament and government (HC 321 2000), and staked a claim for its suitability as a forum through which the prime minister could be scrutinised. It championed the new format on the grounds that it would provide a ‘calmer setting’ for more ‘productive and informative’ scrutiny than was ordinarily available through Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) due its ‘confrontational exchanges and theatrical style’ (HC984 2002, para.3). The scrutiny mechanism has now operated for over 13 years, and involved the questioning of three prime ministers. Yet despite constituting a remarkable institutional innovation in parliamentary practice, and ‘a significant advance in the scrutiny of the Prime Minister’ (Cowley 2007, 23), it has gone largely unexamined by scholars.

We seek to address this gap in the academic literature. The article has two goals: to explain the institutional emergence and evolution of the Liaison Committee evidence sessions with the prime minister, and to assess their contribution to parliamentary scrutiny of the premier. First, we map the landscape of prime ministerial accountability to parliament, its changing nature across time, and review discussion on the perceived utility of PMQs as a mechanism for scrutinising the head of government, which is important given that the Liaison Committee sessions were advocated as both a complement and an antidote to them. Second, we explore the origins and evolution of the Liaison Committee evidence sessions with the prime minister, the institutional and political context in which the innovation occurred and has developed, and discuss the effectiveness of these sessions in enhancing accountability and oversight. We draw on a dozen interviews conducted with Liaison Committee members in 2007, when Tony Blair stepped down as prime minister and there was a natural opportunity for MPs to reflect on what the format had achieved after five years of operation. We also utilise the evidence sessions transcripts, encompassing 11 sessions with Tony Blair, 5 with Gordon Brown, and 14 with David Cameron. Finally, we analyse the constraints faced by the Liaison Committee in delivering this scrutiny, and what these constraints tell us about the contemporary dynamics of prime ministerial accountability to parliament. In reflecting on the evidence sessions, the article contributes to our understanding of parliamentary scrutiny infrastructure, and to broader debates about the challenges of holding to account powerful prime ministers who sit at the centre of contemporary governance systems.

Prime ministerial accountability to parliament

Analysis of the prime minister has focused largely on the power of the office and the utilisation of that power by incumbents, and debates about the nature and style of prime ministerial power and predominance have been extensively debated in recent literature (Dowding 2013; Foley 2013; Heffernan 2003, 2005, 2013; Poguntke and Webb 2013). Scholars have analysed the waxing and waning of the prime minister's central role, and the importance and impact of prime ministerial

leadership to British governance structures and policymaking (Diamond 2014; Barber 2007). The altered landscape of the core executive, with its contextual constraints under the 2010-15 coalition government, added a new layer to the understanding of the blend between personal and structural resource utilisation (Bennister and Heffernan 2012, 2015; Hazell and Yong 2012).

This concentration on the centre of government has overshadowed scholarly analysis of the accountability relationship between the prime minister and parliament. Much is known about policy making, executive organisation, and internal cabinet relations, much less about prime ministerial accountability to the legislature. In part, this is because prime ministers do not have formal responsibility to parliament and remain largely subject to convention. The formal legal powers and financial resources in the British system are vested in the Secretaries of State. In the absence of the formal relationship that binds ministers to parliament, the prime minister is able to determine and configure the rules as he or she sees fit. In this context, Tony Blair was able to alter PMQs from 15 minutes twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays, to 30 minutes once a week on Wednesdays. The change was implemented during the immediate post-1997 ‘honeymoon’ period without any parliamentary debate, and Blair later admitted that any such debate would probably have scuppered the reform (Blair 2010, 108). The capacity of the prime minister to determine the parameters of his or her accountability is therefore considerable. As Hennessy (2000, 58) explains, ‘the most powerful single individual in the land is also the effective quality controller and interpreter-in-chief of the rules of the game – a hugely important, though often overlooked, ingredient in the overmighty power of the British premiership.’

To understand the relationship between prime minister and parliament, we must consider the basic elements of parliamentary accountability. ‘Accountability’ has its etymological roots in Norman English bookkeeping (Bovens 2007), and, in Westminster-derived democracies in particular, many accountability measures are either focused on, or originate from, the close monitoring of

government expenditure. The select committees established in 1979, for example, emerged from parliament's attempts to 'ensur[e] efficiency and 'value for money' (Jogerst, 1993, 39), and the committees were tasked explicitly with overseeing not just the expenditure of government departments, but departmental policy and administration also, in order to deliver more systematic executive scrutiny than had previously been possible (Kelso 2009, 95-8). However, without a department, and thus without an associated select committee performing oversight tasks, the prime minister is arguably subject to less systematic parliamentary scrutiny than the members of his own cabinet. The departmental structure of the select committees has also facilitated the prime minister's historical refusal to appear before them. Certainly, the prime minister answers questions from MPs in the House of Commons, but if accountability involves finding out what has been done and why, then PMQs can be swiftly dismissed as an effective way of holding the prime minister to account, for it does neither.

There is, therefore, an obvious dislocation between theory and practice in much of British politics. Theory has always stressed the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty and championed the theoretical balance between the legislature and the executive. Yet as Kumarasingham (2013, 588) argues, 'the reality is that parliament, with its tight party control in the Westminster system, does not provide the horizontal accountability that it theoretically could.' This 'mismatch' is frequently cited as eroding the legitimacy of parliament (Rhodes 1997; Rhodes and Weller 2005; Shephard 2009; Thomas 2004). At one level, the prime minister is delegated by parliament in the same way as are other government ministers (Strøm 2003), and the prime minister remains in place only for as long as he or she can command the confidence of parliament. Yet, while the delegation appears clear enough, the associated accountability is highly contested.

The mismatch is exacerbated by a succession of prime ministers who have been seemingly uninterested in parliament when political capital can be generated successfully elsewhere. Dunleavy

and Jones (1993) long ago established that prime ministers have become less engaged with parliament, in terms of answering questions, making statements and speeches, and intervening in debates. Their premise was that ‘the prime minister’s active participation in parliamentary proceedings is a key mechanism for ensuring the accountability of the executive’ (Dunleavy and Jones 1993, 267), and therefore that the prime minister was required to be present in the chamber in order to be ‘active’ (Thomas 2004). In the period analysed, there was a long-term decline in prime ministers’ speeches in the Commons, a stepped decline in debating interventions, and a significant decrease in question answering from the late nineteenth century to the 1950s. A number of developments drove these changes. For example, no prime minister simultaneously held the role of Leader of the House after 1942, removing the formal requirement for attendance. While the decline in question answering was reversed with the introduction of PMQs as a specific order of parliamentary business in 1961, analysis by Rush (2014) confirmed that prime ministers have nonetheless become less engaged with parliament, and that this decline was sharpest following the advent of television, and exacerbated by the emergence of alternative avenues of prime ministerial communication in response to evolving media environments.

Nonetheless, the key occasion for parliamentary oversight of the head of government is PMQs. It is the only parliamentary activity which features regularly in news coverage and which prompts significant volumes of political commentary. However, it has become routine in British politics to scoff at the idea that PMQs might be considered a forum capable of delivering meaningful scrutiny, and to marvel instead at the prime minister’s skilled deployment of inventive strategies designed to avoid answering the questions asked. To the extent that PMQs was ever about obtaining information about government policy and decision making, and pressing for government action, it is now an occasion largely motivated by political performance, ritualistic humiliation, and the delivery of headline-grabbing one-liners. Complaints about its functioning have persisted even as PMQs reached the milestone in 2011 of fifty years of operation (Bercow 2012; Bates et al 2014), and

PMQs as a spectacle now trumps any semblance of formal prime ministerial accountability (Cowley and Stuart 2014; Hansard Society 2014). While the format may be championed for its mettle-testing characteristics, its inability to facilitate detailed scrutiny of the head of government means that Hennessy's concerns noted above about 'the necessary restraint' of the prime minister remain live.

Yet, despite the criticisms routinely directed at PMQs, it remains a crucial parliamentary occasion and one which significantly challenges prime ministerial skills. Tony Blair described PMQs 'as the most nerve-racking, discombobulating, nail-biting, bowel-moving, terror-inspiring, courage-draining experience in my prime ministerial life' (Blair 2010, 109). Of course, this emphasises the political and reputational aspects of PMQs, rather than its accountability consequences. Blair was quite candid on this point, declaring it to be 'rather a myth' that PMQs represented 'a great way of holding the prime minister to account': the accountability thesis, he argued, 'assumes that those asking the questions are interested to know the answers. In truth, the whole thing is a giant joust, a sort of modern, non-physical duel' (Blair 2010, 109). He nevertheless maintained that the value of PMQs lay in the fact that a prime minister had to be 'clever, significantly past a basic intellectual threshold, otherwise you will be eaten alive' (Blair 2010, 393), and argued that 'a run of really bad PMQs can put the leader in jeopardy' (Blair 2010, 111). In this context, the format clearly delivers political goods that are considered valuable, even if those goods have little to do with accountability. This insight is crucial to understanding the emergence of the Liaison Committee sessions.

Origins of the Liaison Committee sessions

Secretaries of state and ministers have appeared regularly before departmental select committees since their creation in 1979, to give evidence about their policy responsibilities and departmental activities. However, despite the increasingly pre-eminent role played by departmental select committees in the decades following their formation, the prime minister did not appear before

them.¹ The failure of the prime minister to be subject to select committee scrutiny was viewed by many MPs as a serious problem. In 2000, as part of its inquiry into the Ministerial Code, the Public Administration Committee wrote to the then prime minister, Tony Blair, inviting him to give evidence, on the basis that the Code was the responsibility of the prime minister and underwent revisions at his or her behest, and so only the prime minister could be held accountable to parliament for it (HC 235, 2001, Appendix 4). Blair rejected this view, citing the tradition of ministerial responsibility for providing select committee evidence, and noting that ‘Prime Ministers have not themselves, by long-standing convention, given evidence to Select Committees’ (HC 235, 2001, Appendix 4). The Liaison Committee pursued the matter in a report on executive scrutiny, which advocated the benefits of the prime minister discussing government policies in a non-partisan forum, and noted that if he accepted an annual invitation to appear before it, he would not be called before any other select committees (HC 321, 2000). Downing Street declined this offer, again citing the convention that prime ministers do not give evidence to select committees, and arguing that to do so might jeopardise established lines of ministerial accountability (HC 321, 2000).

Yet, behind the scenes, developments were afoot. In December 2001, the then Leader of the House of Commons, the late Robin Cook MP, ‘pressed’ the prime minister to appear before the Liaison Committee as part of a broader parliamentary modernisation programme, and Downing Street advisers also attempted to convince Blair of the merits of attending such sessions (Cook 2003, 141). But Blair resisted, and in spring 2002, Cook asked the chairman of the Public Administration Committee, Tony Wright MP, to drop the matter, because there was ‘simply no way that the prime minister was ever going to agree to attend’ (interview with Liaison Committee member, June 2007). It therefore came as a surprise when, in April 2002, the prime minister approached the Liaison Committee chair, Alan Williams MP, and offered to appear twice a year to discuss domestic and foreign affairs (HC 984, 2002).

Blair later made light of his ‘Damascene conversion’ (HC1095 2002, Q1). The chairs then in situ reported that no reasons were given for the decision’s reversal, although several speculated that Blair was probably convinced by his advisers that such appearances could usefully demonstrate his engagement with parliament, and that, given Blair’s political skills and communication abilities, he probably felt that he had ‘nothing to fear’, with one noting that ‘he was, after all, a trained barrister’ (interviews, June/July 2007). The start of the new sessions with the Liaison Committee, in July 2002, also coincided with Blair’s new schedule of monthly televised press conferences. Both events were undoubtedly linked to a desire to make the prime minister appear more accountable and accessible. As Blair subsequently told the Liaison Committee, ‘politics comes under a great deal of attack ... and I think a session like this can help us show to the public, and to the media, that all of us in Parliament are trying to do our best to struggle with the issues that concern our constituents’ (HC1095 2002, Q.1). Strategically, both the Liaison Committee sessions and the monthly press conferences emerged at a point in the Blair premiership when he was attempting to regain control of a domestic reform agenda which had stalled during the first term, and which was at serious risk of being further marginalised on account of the agenda-setting consequences of the terrorist attacks of September 11th (Seldon 2007, 19-21, 47). Add to this the growing pressures Blair faced in his second term from the Chancellor, Gordon Brown, about the likely date of the controversial ‘hand-over’ the two men had agreed in 1994, along with the difficulties faced by Number 10 in leveraging Treasury support for public sector reform (Seldon 2007, 21), and we begin to understand the value for the prime minister of a forum through which he could talk extensively about his domestic policy agenda and his vision as head of government.

Consequently, the context in which these evidence sessions were agreed is crucial to understanding their character and evolution. As the prime minister initially refused requests to appear before the committee, his subsequent offer to attend dramatically changed the political terrain on which the process was negotiated. Rather than Blair acquiescing to a select committee request for his time, he

instead offered himself to them. This reconfigured the underpinning political narrative, and subsequently enabled Blair to remind the Liaison Committee that he was giving evidence under his own initiative, and that he was the first premier ever to do so. The prime minister also offered more of his time than was requested: in 2000, the Liaison Committee suggested that he appear before them once a year, yet in 2002, Blair offered to appear twice a year. A generous interpretation might portray the prime minister as simply eager to contribute to deepened executive accountability, but a more realistic one would point out that, by not only offering to appear before the committee, but also to appear more often than had been requested, Number 10 was determining not only the rules of the political game, but also the nature of the ballpark on which it would be played.

The evolving scrutiny format

The first evidence session held by the Liaison Committee with the prime minister took place on 16 July 2002, and one committee member explained that it constituted ‘a serious attempt to analyse the prime minister’s leadership of policy direction’ (interview, June 2007). In advance of the session, the chair of the Liaison Committee met with the committee members to discuss themes for exploration with the prime minister (interviews, June 2007). Four themes were chosen: the role of the prime minister inside government and his relationship with parliament, the delivery of public services, international affairs and the war on terror, and the quality of political life. These themes were communicated to the prime minister two weeks before the scheduled evidence session, to enable Number 10 to prepare, although the specific questions to be asked were not shared. The committee determined which MPs would pursue the agreed themes in their questions, and parliamentary clerks provided assistance, as standard, in terms of question preparation, although neither the committee generally nor the chair specifically decided the specific topic of MPs’ questions, which was left to individuals to decide for themselves (interviews, June 2007).

The evidence session took place in a Portcullis House committee room, and lasted two and a half

hours, with a total of 123 questions being asked and answered. Although few of those who championed the evidence sessions imagined that they would be an immediate panacea for parliament's scrutiny shortcomings, the first session was nevertheless perceived as a damp squib, and received mixed reviews in the press. While *The Guardian* leader (17 July 2002) described the occasion as 'much more informative and interesting' than PMQs, and one that 'showed parliament looking good too,' the same newspaper's sketch-writer, Simon Hoggart, likened it to being 'savaged by a feather duster.' Noting that the committee chair's 'long-winded introduction' had 'caused the prime minister to slump and to stare through glazed eyes at the desk in front of him', Hoggart concluded that 'this lot are just not very good at asking questions' (Hoggart 2002). Similarly, *The Independent* (17 July 2002) described it as 'bloodless' and 'low-key', and at some remove from the 'fierce cross-examination' that had been anticipated. The questioning to which Blair was subjected was described diplomatically by the *Daily Telegraph* as 'respectful', while *The Times* observed that 'something had gone horribly wrong' because 'Tony Blair was evidently enjoying himself, which really wasn't the point of the exercise at all,' further noting that although some of the committee's most skilled inquisitors 'threatened thunder', the 'storm never broke.' The broadsheet press in general noted Blair's relaxed style, amiable grin, and his appearance in shirt-sleeves, all indicative, in their estimation, of the absence of any real testing of the premier.

Although the committee identified four discussion themes in advance, the vast terrain actually covered by MPs constituted a fundamental design flaw. As all 27 MPs on the Liaison Committee represented a committee with its own policy orientation (and some with none at all, given the inclusion of the House domestic committees in the Liaison Committee), it made for an unfocused romp across a wide swath of public policy, and MPs largely failed to generate any depth. Questions about the lack of homeopathy and herbalist provision on the NHS (HC 1095 2002, Q.56) and the shortage of skilled parliamentary draftsmen (Q.32) proved to be particular low-points, and the overall impression was of a scrutiny session characterised by incoherence and a failure to identify

those topics on which the prime minister could be usefully quizzed, with the consequence that detailed scrutiny remained elusive. Questions were frequently sprawling and over-long, and MPs subsequently complained that the size of the Liaison Committee made it difficult for them to coordinate strategy, and that the participation of so many MPs (23 in total asked questions) had fragmented the session (interviews, June 2007). Many agreed that the questioning ranged too widely, and that while useful traction had been generated in places, overall they had failed to ‘drill down to the specifics’ (interviews, June 2007). One member noted that, while MPs on a ‘good’ select committee would ‘learn to work with one another’ and enable individuals to pursue questions if mining a particularly good seam, the problem was that ‘everybody was asking little individual fractured questions’ (interview, June 2007). A ‘post match analysis’ was subsequently conducted, during which MPs watched the session and examined the transcript, in order to pinpoint what had gone wrong (interviews, June 2007).

Over time, MPs sought to improve their management of the format. The second session, on 21 January 2003 (HC 334i 2003), focused exclusively on Iraq and the war on terror, coming as it did less than two months before the deployment of British armed forces, and afforded the opportunity to cover a crucial issue in considerable depth. By the time the third session took place, on 8 July 2003 (HC334ii 2003), the Committee had learned the virtues of focusing their questions more carefully, and the three agreed themes of Iraq, the European Union, and the UK constitution delivered far more detailed questioning than had been in evidence a year earlier. For the fourth session, the Liaison Committee members worked in advance in small teams, with each theme benefitting from a group ‘leader’ who helped with question orchestration (interviews, July 2007). Yet even although the domestic policy theme was supposed to focus on tuition fees and foundation hospitals, it actually covered a broad range of domestic policy questions, such as transport, local government, and public sector targets. The committee subsequently restricted the number of participating MPs, to facilitate the sustained questioning that they were not yet fully realising. In

restricting participation to around 8-12 MPs, the Liaison Committee later argued that this better reflected the normal size of a select committee oral evidence session (HC 954 2014, para.6). The length of the session was a further constraint on the scrutiny format, but one that took longer to resolve. Two and a half hours is a long time for uninterrupted questioning, and some MPs believed it contributed to the lack of focus (interviews, June/July 2007). After David Cameron became prime minister, he agreed to a new format of three ninety-minute hearings each year (HC 608ii 2011). This lent itself to fewer topics and thus, in theory, to more succinct questioning. The committee also sought to further restrict the range of topics by looking at areas where it believed the prime minister's input had been 'decisive or significant' (HC608i 2010, Q.2) and 'concentrating on areas where the Prime Minister makes a difference within government' (HC 954 2014, para.6).

Analysis of the accumulated transcripts since 2002 undoubtedly demonstrates the remarkable range of issues on which the Liaison Committee has quizzed the prime minister, and that this diversity has continued across all three premiers, but it also demonstrates an effort over time to narrow the breadth of topics. While topic diversity might on the one hand point to the contingent nature of the premiership, and the value of scrutiny infrastructure that is responsive to different prime ministerial modes and policy interests, it also points to the desire of Liaison Committee MPs to pursue the policy specialisms of their own select committees. This is hardly surprising, although it does raise the question of whether the sessions generate breadth at the expense of depth. Yet, analysis of the sessions themselves compels a more nuanced conclusion on this point, because the range of topics explored has not always precluded the sort of detailed scrutiny the format was designed to facilitate.

The questioning faced by Tony Blair on public sector reform, for example, necessitated lengthy articulation of his policy approach, his sustained justification of the policy decisions taken, and explanation about why his chosen policy instruments were best placed to achieve the stated societal goals. Consequently, the questioning of Blair's successor, Gordon Brown, on this topic focused on

how his premiership would differ in its approach to public service delivery, with Brown claiming a vision for more personalised and diverse public services that was subject to considerable interrogation (HC 192-i 2007, Q.1-27). Brown also faced incisive questions from committee chairs on his *Governance of Britain* policy agenda and the future of the UK constitution (HC 192-ii 2007; HC 257-ii 2009; HC346-i 2010), which Brown claimed as a central policy issue for his premiership, and the questioning revealed crucial weaknesses in the prime minister's constitutional conceptualisations, for example with regard to approaches to the so-called English Question (HC 192-i 2007, Q.49-51), an issue which has since grown in prominence. The committee continued to pursue constitutional themes in relation to the 2009 MPs expenses scandal and the government's response to it, which enabled extensive excavation of Brown's constitutional policy towards the end of his time in office (HC257-ii 2009, Q.211-226; HC346-i 2010, Q.36-48). The Liaison Committee also committed considerable time during the Brown era on the 2008 global financial crash, with the majority of the 12 February 2009 session devoted to this matter (HC 257-i 2009). Arguments that the Liaison Committee fails to drill down into policy details while questioning the prime minister can be easily rebuffed with reference to that session, with questions about the Tri-partite Committee and its discussions of HBOS, and the policy of 'market-driven industrial activism' as a response to the downturn, proving especially vigorous (Q.8-16; Q.37-52).

The Liaison Committee's time with David Cameron also signalled a new dimension to questioning, with MPs quizzing the prime minister more directly about his own specific role in government policy and decision making. For example, the first session included questions about Cameron's role during the comprehensive spending review, his involvement in ministerial conflict resolution, and his agenda setting capacity (HC608-i 2010, Q.1-7), and about his personal involvement in the strategic defence review (Q.24-36), prompting illuminating answers from the prime minister about his position at the heart of government. The committee also spent an entire session exploring what the prime minister meant by the 'Big Society' (HC608-iv 2012), a theme chosen because Cameron

said he was so passionate about it (Q.289); returned repeatedly to the broad theme of green policy (HC484-ii 2013; HC939 2014; HC887 2014), which Cameron had declared in opposition to be central to modern Conservatism; and probed extensively the issue of civil service organisation and reform (HC468-i 2013; HC647 2013; HC1015 2015), which is a key prime ministerial responsibility. The Liaison Committee also used the 20 November 2014 session to explore in forensic detail the prime minister's approach to constitutional policy following the Scottish independence referendum (HC683 2014). Crucially, the committee expanded its sphere of action when it took evidence from the Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, on the basis of his leadership of the Rio+20 summit in the prime minister's place. The Environmental Audit Committee had asked Clegg to give evidence as part of its enquiry into this summit, but although Clegg appeared before the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee given his particular policy brief, he argued against setting a precedent for other policy areas. The Environment Audit Committee subsequently asked the Liaison Committee to take evidence on its behalf (HC200 2013, para.6), and it used that session to focus not just on the Rio summit, but also on other policy issues.

Constraints, contingencies and capabilities: the evidence sessions in perspective

Despite the evolution of the evidence sessions, and indications that the prime minister has been subjected to increasingly incisive and detailed questioning, critics of the format have persisted, with journalists in particular chiding it as a 'dull, but worthy' practice (White 2014), and as a 'bore-a-thon' that does not leave 'blood on the carpet' (Heppell and Theakston 2014). MPs themselves continue to press for further improvements: Andrew Tyrie MP has called for monthly sessions (notable because Tyrie became Liaison Committee chair in October 2015), while Jack Straw MP has advocated cutting the participating membership to only five MPs (Institute for Government 2011). These critiques and reform proposals offer interesting insights into expectations about what these sessions ought to be delivering in terms of parliamentary scrutiny on the one hand, and public spectacle on the other.

At the end of the Tony Blair period, for example, most Liaison Committee members remained downbeat about what they had achieved during six years of questioning. One explained that ‘we never laid a glove on him’ (interview, June 2007), an intriguing phrase which evokes the adversarial nature of Westminster politics, and reveals a tantalising glimpse into what is perhaps the underlying, if unstated, goal of the sessions: namely, to deliver a knock-out blow by asking the prime minister a question which provokes the admission of guilt, negligence or failure that many apparently regard as the primary objective. Another MP noted that, ‘Blair never felt under any pressure from us whatsoever ... through all those hours of questions, we never came close to making him sweat’ (interview, June 2007). One MP explained that Blair’s supreme communication skills made it hard for them to ‘find a crack in that polished exterior’, and another laughed to recall the way that Blair ‘would just come into the room, smiling, nodding to people, take off his jacket and roll up his sleeves like he was ready for anything’ (interviews, June/July 2007). ‘He just talked at you,’ one MP remarked ruefully, ‘and it was incredibly difficult to get a way in’ (interview, June 2007). Another member explained that Blair was:

such an accomplished performer, that your ability to get below his radar and be able to find out what was actually on his mind when he made particular decisions or [chose] particular policy directions, has actually been very frustrating, because I don’t think we ever managed to do that (interview, June 2007)

In this respect, the constraints on the oversight capacity of these sessions were as much a function of the MPs’ limited questioning skills as they were of Tony Blair’s renowned communication abilities. Blair was apparently never anxious about his sessions with the Liaison Committee: while his memoir paints a colourful picture of his fear of PMQs (Blair 2010, 109-12), it makes no mention

of the Liaison Committee sessions he himself was instrumental in establishing. Similarly, when David Cameron appeared before the committee in November 2010 and was informed by the chair that ‘the purpose of these sessions ... is quite different from Wednesday’s Question Time’, the prime minister’s succinct, and revealing, response was, ‘That’s a relief’ (HC 608 2010, Q.1).

While the sessions constitute an important source of engagement between parliament and prime minister, of a different character to that of PMQs, they have not proved to be an automatically challenging environment for a well prepared and erudite prime minister. Blair may have been a sublime political communicator, but neither Brown nor Cameron came any closer than Blair did to the sort of ‘upending’ for which many observers apparently live in hope, although there are certainly instances where both were considerably animated, even annoyed, during their interactions with committee MPs. In this respect, the Liaison Committee is ideally suited for this scrutiny role. Its MPs are established parliamentarians who do not shrink from asking difficult questions of government, and who, since 2010, claim considerable legitimacy and autonomy as a consequence of being directly elected by the whole House of Commons to their committee chairs. As the prime minister’s remit can involve any or all policy areas, the ability to draw on chair expertise as the subject under consideration requires can help redress resource asymmetries between parliament and government. Yet the Liaison Committee is unlike a departmental select committee in significant respects, not least because most of its functions are not focused on scrutiny, and this constitutes a considerable constraint on its capacity for action. Its remit, as defined in House of Commons Standing Orders, includes consideration and advice on general matters relating to the work and organization of select committees, and in terms of government scrutiny and oversight, Standing Order 145(2) merely says that, ‘the committee may also hear evidence from the prime minister on matters of public policy.’ Nowhere is ‘accountability’, ‘scrutiny’ or ‘oversight’ mentioned. The prime ministerial evidence sessions are therefore only one aspect of the committee’s work, which is otherwise focused largely on organization. Moreover, that the committee ‘may hear evidence from

the prime minister on matters of public policy' is a very much weaker statement of its scrutiny activity than that of the departmental standing committees which are charged with the examination of the 'expenditure, administration and policy' of the departments they shadow and of associated government bodies. Neither does the Liaison Committee conduct inquiries into the prime minister of the kind pursued by the departmental select committees. The hearings with the prime minister are stand-alone sessions, are not part of broader policy investigations, and do not involve open calls for written evidence and follow-up oral evidence with multiple witnesses. Only the transcripts of the evidence sessions are published; the committee produces no report on the sessions, and draws no conclusions about them either, which arguably leaves the evidence sessions themselves as somewhat atomised entities.

When analysing accountability relationships, the questions of accountable to whom, how and for what must be considered (Mulgan 2003, 47). The Liaison Committee has recommended that select committees 'identify what are the most important functions of their department's responsibilities and design a programme of scrutiny to assess whether the department's objectives have been fulfilled' (HC 697 2012, para. 64). Yet the contingent nature of the role of prime minister presents challenges for the Liaison Committee in its own scrutiny endeavours: although prime ministers may dominate many, even all, aspects of government, they are formally responsible for relatively little. While there have been clear efforts, particularly recently, to focus the sessions on areas where the prime minister is pivotal, or has declared a keen interest, the tendency has been to focus on major topics in current affairs, topics which could, in most instances, have been covered by the relevant departmental select committee. Foreign affairs issues loom particularly large on this point: for example, while the prime minister was being quizzed by the Liaison Committee in 2002 and 2003 about the decision to go to war in Iraq, the Foreign Affairs Select Committee was pursuing exactly the same issue (HC 813 2003), yet was unable to interrogate the one person ultimately responsible for that decision, namely Tony Blair. The prime minister, as head of government, is expected to

speak for government on any and all aspects of government policy, and the prime minister frequently takes a major, even dominant, role in specific policy areas at certain times, as Blair did in foreign policy. But, even where this is the case, there is a proper chain of accountability: there is a minister to speak for government on the matter and a select committee with oversight responsibility, through which MPs can quiz ministers about where decision making power lies and how policy is made. One of the major challenges faced by the Liaison Committee has been to determine exactly what topics it can usefully question the prime minister about, and its success in those determinations has been undoubtedly mixed.

Whatever their shortcomings, the evidence sessions have probably entrenched the principle that the prime minister should be held directly accountable to a parliamentary committee, and it would be hard, although not impossible, for future prime ministers to refuse to appear. Yet even if questions remain about the nature of the scrutiny delivered by these sessions, this simply highlights the necessity of adopting a more expansive view of their political and institutional utility. If we move beyond crude assumptions of scrutiny as an activity designed to triumphantly wrong-foot the prime minister and extract from him admissions of gross errors, then we can secure a far richer and more illuminating understanding of what the purpose of scrutiny ought to be. Thus, perhaps the chief value of the evidence sessions is that they have offered a unique insight into prime ministerial thinking and approach to government. As one committee member explained in relation to Tony Blair:

the usefulness ... has been the fact that he's been forced to lay out his thought processes, the discussion processes, even the structured processes that have meant that the government has got to a certain point on a certain subject matter (interview, June 2007).

The format of PMQs certainly does not afford these kinds of insights, whereas the committee format is far better positioned to delve into the justifications and philosophies which underpin prime ministerial approaches to government and policy making, precisely because it is designed to enable premiers to be quizzed at length on these themes.

There is also another perspective, in terms of what the prime minister gains from participation in these hearings. During his first appearance before the committee, Tony Blair stated that, to the extent that PMQs was ‘80 per cent theatre’, the hearings would give him the opportunity ‘to try to make sure that people understand better what we are about’ and to show that most of his time was ‘actually spent ... mostly on domestic matters ... in particular the economy and public sector reform’ (HC 1095 2002, Q.1 & Q2). The session provided the prime minister with an opportunity to articulate his policy agenda at length. Similarly, after five years as prime minister, David Cameron explained that the sessions ‘give me the chance to try to explain more about what the Government are doing across a broader basis’ (HC 1015 2015, Q.75). He also pointed both to the basic accountability function of the sessions and, significantly, to their capacity to strategically empower the prime minister, when he added that, in order to prepare, he had to ‘check all that is happening in those specific areas’, which he believed made it ‘a force for good in government as well’ (HC 1015 2015, Q.75). That the evidence sessions represent a strategic resource both for parliament *and* for the prime minister is central to understanding their political and institutional dynamics.

By moving beyond ‘blood-on-the-carpet’ conceptualisations of parliamentary scrutiny, we can instead conceive of this format in broader and more useful terms. Ultimately, the Liaison Committee evidence sessions with the prime minister constitute a form of deliberative exchange between political elites. If discussion and debate are fundamental parliamentary activities, then these sessions deliver both in spades by bringing together Westminster and Whitehall elite actors in a remarkably intimate, yet still public, setting. The position of parliamentary elites is elevated by

their privileged access to the prime minister, through which they are empowered not only to articulate their own views, but to quiz the premier on the wisdom of his policy approaches and decision making. The position of that most elite of government elites is also elevated in that it provides the prime minister with a public space for the lengthy articulation of his views on any number of crucial political issues, and affords him additional opportunities to delve into the workings of departments in the name of detailed preparation. Through the evidence sessions, these interlinked sets of elite actors meet in order to fulfil that most basic of parliamentary functions: visible government answerability and accountability to elected representatives. The format undoubtedly requires further improvement and refinement. However, those who complain that the evidence sessions deliver too few political fireworks not only misunderstand the purpose of the occasion, but also fail to appreciate the fundamental value of executive answerability to the operation of parliamentary democracy.

Conclusion

The Liaison Committee evidence sessions with the prime minister represent a significant development in the relationship between the prime minister and parliament. There are certainly challenging questions about their future operation. Can a large committee be effective? How can the operation of the sessions be more flexible and responsive? Can insights from the sessions be more fully utilised elsewhere, particularly through other forms of parliamentary scrutiny work? Yet, it is probably too easy to overlook the innovative nature of these sessions in parliamentary terms, and it is worth noting that the format does not appear to have been replicated anywhere else in the world. As one MP argued, ‘people don’t seem to realise just how revolutionary it is to have a prime minister sit in front of you for all those hours in public’ (interview, June 2007).

MPs have been positive about the innovation, and the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee argued that ‘the Liaison Committee has the potential to be a very effective mechanism

by which Parliament can hold the Prime Minister to account,' and that the evidence sessions bring 'a welcome balance to the superficial nature of Prime Minister's Questions' (HC 351 2014, 27). Their emergence and evolution demonstrate the reflexivity of parliamentary scrutiny mechanisms and the growing appetite amongst MPs for pursuing more rigorous accountability of government. Furthermore, the symbolic act of enabling the prime minister to provide a detailed account of his decisions to MPs in an interrogatory environment is highly significant. The prime minister is the pre-eminent decision maker at the heart of UK central government, albeit one embedded in a complex web of relationships with other powerful ministerial actors, and the Liaison Committee's future management of prime ministerial scrutiny has the potential not just to enhance accountability processes, but also to reveal insights into the nature of government decision-making and the power of, and constraints on, the premiership.

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¹ It is a misconception that prime ministers never appeared before select committees. Ramsay MacDonald appeared before the Procedure Committee in 1931, and there are other examples. However, when PMs appeared they did so in their capacity as Leader of the House (historically a post often held by the prime minister), not to answer questions about their role as prime minister.